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ABSTRACT

If English teachers are an endangered species, as is sometimes said, they must attempt to survive by adapting to a changing environment and explaining their work to the public. Community college teachers should teach critical reading skills by starting with materials relevant to students' lives, should teach writing by stressing conceptual skills before technical skills, and should provide students with information-and act on it themselves-about the nature of language and dialects and about emotional biases toward certain language choices. English teachers should also work to counter the current tendencies to regard English as a "tool subject" and education as a business, and to mandate competency testing programs. They should familiarize themselves and the public with the findings of an investigation of declining Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, which suggest that the causes and potential solutions are complex and which fail to provide support for a back-to-basics movement; and they should work hard interpreting what tests measure and what they mean. English teachers should speak out in letters to Congressional representatives and news media and in public meetings. Humane English teaching and equal educational opportunities are indeed endangered, and English teachers should fight to protect them. (GW)

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LIZ MCPHERSON KEYNOTES 1977 CONFERENCE

"English, an Endgangered Species? What can we do to safeguard it?" was Elizabeth McPherson's title for the keynote address at the opening general session of the twelfth annual Northeast Regional Conference on October 21, 1977 at the Sheraton East in Buffalo. Her speech was so moving, so apt, so well-received, that in response to many requests and with Liz's kind permission, we are reprinting it in its entirety.

I find the notion of English teachers as an endangered species intriguing. Being an English teacher myself, I began immediately to look for analogies. I started by discarding such species as the malaria mosquito, whose elimination is generally considered a good thing. Even though a few people sometimes maintain that we do more harm than good, I'm assuming that no one in this audience wants to contemplate the complete eradication of English teachers.

I moved on to creatures generally considered worth saving. Two endangered species that have received a lot of publicity lately are the Kentucky cave bat and a kind of little wild snapdragon with a funny name. Both these species will disappear if the Army Engineers are allowed to go ahead with some dams. In Missouri, conservationists have been using the survival of the little bat as an argument for a larger, but equally commendable purpose--keeping a big wildlife area in its natural state. The little snapdragon, I gather, is serving a similar purpose in New England. But the bats and the snapdragons are small, helpless, and rare; they don't have much in common with English teachers, and the Sierra Club, which is excited about the bats and the flowers, will probably not come to our rescue.

So I moved farther back, to what might be called the pre-conservationist era. Nobody was around to protect the whooping crane or the American buffalo. The crane disappeared in a spirit of good clean fun--shooting cranes was excellent sport--and the buffalo were wiped out partly for fun, partly for profit, and partly in an effort to exterminate the American Indians whose livelihood was closely tied to buffalos. It's true that the Bureau of Indian Affairs was set up, theoretically, to safeguard the Indians, but in view of the record, I don't think English teachers would benefit from that kind of protection.

I moved back even rather, back to the pre-people era and arrived at the dinosaurs. In a lot of ways, dinosaurs seemed to make a better analogy: they were big, they were plentiful, and they had a lot of potential power. They should have been invincible--but you never see a dinosaur around any more. When I went to school, they told me the dinosaurs disappeared because they couldn't adapt, because they couldn't protect themselves in a changing environment. Since I began playing with metaphor, a friend has told me that modern theory claims the dinosaurs did adapt--they evolved into birds--but I don't intend to let that bit of information bother me, any more than people who want to talk about ostriches burying their heads in the sand are bothered by knowing that no actual living ostrich ever did such a silly thing. The ostrich of folklore is much more useful for metaphorical purposes than the real ostrich, and the dinosaurs of my childhood are more useful for this metaphor than dinosaurs that may have turned into sparrows--although that, too, is an analogy that invites some brooding.

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If English teachers are endangered--and maybe we are--we can take a lesson from the dinosaurs of my childhood. We'd better adapt to a changing envioronment--move out of the past and into the present-- and we'd better start protecting ourselves. Nobody else is likely to do it.

The first step in self-protection is deciding what we ought to be teaching now, and how we can best fit that teaching to the needs of present-day students and the present-day community--and in 1977, I guess our community is the world. I can provide my list of do's and don'ts for English teachers in the late 70's; and one function of this conference, of course, is a discussion of whether my list is valid.

There are just three subjects on my list: reading, writing, and language. The subjects are pretty traditional; the adapting lies in the way we approach them.

Reading, of course, is a major part of our job. In spite of television, in spite of McLuhan, almost nobody can live successfully in our technological society without being able to read. Community colleges have always taught reading but mostly we've called it literature, and we've taught it with a capital "L." Literature is what we like teaching; it's what most of us were trained to do. But in spite of our love of literature, when we face students whose problem is reading a set of directions, students who are floored by the front page of the daily paper, students who are flunking psychology and botany because the textbook is beyond them, we must work with reading on a more elementary level than the anaysis of theme and symbol in Crane's Red Badge of Courage or a dissection of poetical elements in Robert Frost. We can't shove reading off to the skills center or the remedial sections; the need is too pervasive. Specialist in reading can't do it all. For one thing, there aren't enough specialists; for another, it's time we admitted that reading instruction is every class we teach, not matter what the class is called. And if we need to create new classes and give them euphemistic names--"Reading Contemporary Prose" is one possibility--let's do it. Let's do it without any feeling of being demeaned by moving from Hemingway to the Daily Herald.

It's true that we don't know nearly enough about the problems involved in teaching adults to read. But one way we can adapt to the needs of our students is to stop bewailing their illiterarcy, stop berating the grade schools and high schools that haven't taught them, and find out what the stumbling blocks are--find out and then get those blocks out of the way.

First we must teach our students to read with understanding, whatever their level, and then we can teach them to read with discrimination. When we do go on to literature, we need to remember that literature existed because it's a way of mirroring and understanding the human condition. Good literature is good, not because some authority labled it "great," but because it expressed human emotion honestly, because it said something to people in the period in which it was written. We need to remember that standards of beauty vary with both time and culture--and with experience. Instead of forcing students to contemplate the monuments of western culture, or to admire what we think is great and beautiful, we have to begin critical reading on material that relates to their own lives and experiences; once they have begun, they may graduate--gradually--to the more esoteric and unfamiliar. In the last ten years I haven't seen more than two students ready to contrast

Kit Marlowe's blank verse with William Shakespeare's, but I have had a few students, in Survey of English Literature, who could compare Beowulf and Superman and contrast the values represented by those two heroes, both of whom possessed supernatural powers.

Our students are more likely to be reading comic strips, Gothic romances, and westerns than "best books" or James Baldwin. They're even more likely to be saturated with Star Wars, Kojak, "As the World Turns," and the current version of "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman." But Steve Canyon and Kojak deal in values just as surely as the medieval morality plays did. Comics and television serials would not continue to exist unless they exemplified the values a lot of people hold; and by their continued existence, they help to develop those values. If we disagree with the values--and I hope most of us do--then we're responsible for helping students recognize and examine what those values are. Reading anything with discrimination, whether it's a great book or a comic book, means articulating a set of standards. Nevertheless, I don't think we should force students to accept ours. Students will progress faster by discovering their own values, testing those values against what they read, and revising them as their tastes develop. Standards and values handed out by authority figures are, at best, boring; at worst, alienating. Aristotle, after all, lived in a different time and faced a set of crises different from ours. So, in another sense, did Cleanth Brooks and Lionel Trilling. Keats is certainly more important than Kojak, but I don't think Keats is diminished by our beginning with the world our students actually inhabit. I'm pretty sure our students' possibilities are diminished if we don't start where they are.

We must teach reading and we must teach writing. Writing may seem to me the most important part of our job merely because I've spent more than half a lifetime teaching it, but I think it's important for other reasons too. Writing is a way of coming to terms with our own experience; it's a way of sorting out what we think, and a way--still probably the only sustained and satisfactory way--of transferring ideas from our own heads to the heads of other people.

Writing is hard to teach--witness the number of university professors who have scrambled out of composition, and the moaning of those forced back into it by declining graduate enrollments. One reason we've had so much trouble with writing, I think, is because we start at the wrong end. We try to teach people to edit before they've produced anything worth editing. Writing takes two kinds of abilities, which can be roughly divided into conceptual skills and technical skills. The conceptual skills include clarity, logical reasoning, classification--in other words, the ability to think, to organize ideas, to communicate. The technical skills include such things as paragraphing, punctuation, and spelling--the ability to translate the symbols of speech (sounds, intonations, gestures) into the symbols of writing (a badly fitting alphabet and an incomplete set of punctuation marks). Too many of us have behaved for too long as though the technical skills were the important part. Too many colleges use a test of technical skills as a way of shutting students out. All of us know that spelling, punctuation, usage, inflectional endings, are the superficialities of writing, not its essence. They're the polish that's added when the furniture is built, the table manners that make a good meal more attractive. But many of the students in community colleges have struggled so long with the polish, they've been put down so often for their failure to conform to the etiquette of writing, that they've never come to grips with the process, with the essence.

If we begin with the conceptual skills, we stand a better chance of actually teaching students to write. Teaching writing involves a recognition of purposes, and the way those purposes affect what gets written. It involves audiences, and practice in writing for first one audience and then another. It involves seeing the difference between honest opinion, intended to inform, and deliberate slant, intended to deceive. It involves moving from safe, easy generalizations to specific statements and examples, grounded in knowledge and experience. It involves respect for accuracy and for logic. It involves comparing the effectiveness of one way of saying something against another way, not because one way is "right" and the other "wrong," but because one way is clear and the other vague, because one way is vivid and the other dull. It involves the realization that "sounding like a textbook" is usually bad writing, that sounding like people is often very good. Finally, of course, it involves the editing that makes life easier for readers--that's where the technical skills come in--but they're an end, not a beginning.

Students will need to be warned, unfortunately, that people who are ignorant about the nature of language may judge their intelligence in terms of their spelling, and that some of the uninformed people who care more about superficials than sense may be teaching their other college courses. But an understanding of linguistic prejudice is part of knowing something about the nature of language--and that's the third thing we need to teach.

It seems a little obvious to say that language is part of our job, but except for some rather outdated and inaccurate grammar, most of it useless, language has been largely ignored by English Departments. As teachers, we need to know a lot more about the English language than most of us do; when we were in college, we took literary criticism instead of linguistics. But what we don't know, we can still find out. We ought to know something about where English came from; we ought to know that from the beginning it was a mixture of dialects; that it was, and is, in a constant state of borrowing and creating--something from the Danes, something from the Greeks, something from the advertisers, and something from the streets. It never has been, and presumably never will be, "pure," and our efforts to purify it are bound to be self-defeating. Instead of spending our time on usage drills and fretting over minor variations from the way we like to think we talk, we should concentrate on helping our students use the language they already possess, and use it to communicate more coherently, more clearly, more convincingly. Instead of bombarding them with "corrections," we should make them aware of choices, and of the effect those choices will have on listeners and readers. The difference between corrections and choices may sound like a minor distinction, but it isn't. It's the difference between saying "That's wrong. Loan is not a verb, it's a noun" and asking "How many of the people you know talk about loaning money instead of lending it? Is 'loan' joining the ranks of functional shift words, such as love/love, hope/hope, in spite of the usage section in the handbooks?" It's the difference between saying "You can't say he's a prejudice person. Past participles end in -ed" and asking "What judgments do you make about people who say 'a prejudice person'? If you're bothered by it, does it bother you more in speech or in writing? Why? Does it bother you that all of us nowadays say 'ice cream' rather than 'iced cream'? Can you see any comparison between 'ice cream' and 'prejudice person'?" Such questions will lead into a consideration of dialects and the distinctions that should be made between purity and propriety, between propriety and prestige. Community colleges get lots of

of students who don't speak the prestige dialect; they need some reassurance about the value of their own language. We have to make them comfortable before we can help them be coherent.

One way to make them comfortable is to hand them the CCCC Background statement on the Students' Right to Their Own Language. It's cheap--NCTE sells it for about 40¢ in quantity lots. Students won't agree with all of it--you won't agree with all of it--but for some students, talking about the positions taken in that short document opens up a whole new view of language, and even if they decide to adopt the so-called standard dialect, they'll have clearer reasons for making the shift.

All students need honest information about dialects. They also need to know how euphemisms conceal ugly facts--how the term "restraint" can make straight-jackets, handcuffs and beatings acceptable. They need to understand how doublespeak lends respectability to lying, conceals motives in a welter of jargon, and soothes us all into supposing that buying the very best deodorant matters more than eliminating the stink of poverty and privation. They need to realize that language shapes, and reflects, our view of reality. As them how many phrases containing the word "black" have good connotations. There aren't very many. Ask them why we use "white" as a word of praise.

NCTE doesn't have a pamphlet, yet, on avoiding racism in language, but it does have a set of guidelines on avoiding sexism. The guidelines, by which all NCTE affiliates, including this one, are supposed to be bound, gives advice on getting around the notion that all meetings are chaired by men, that "everybody" is always "he." And is seems more important to me for students to recognize the racist and sexist elements in our language--and avoid them--than for students to memorize--or follow--that hoary old rule about pronouns agreeing with their antecedents.

If we want to survive--another way of putting it might be, if we're worth perserving--we must provide honest information about what language is , about what dialects are, about emotional biases toward certain language choice, and about the lack of scientific basis for those biases. We must not only provide students with that information, we must act on it ourselves.

But a lot of us have already made changes I've listed, and it hasn't been enough. We seem in greater danger now than we have ever been. Some of us have been tempted to attribute the danger to the changes, and urge us to seek safety by turning backward. Ethically, I think, we can't do that, and it wouldn't help much anyway. Survival demands that we do all we can to meet student needs honestly and humanely, but it also demands that a majority of the public be convinced that we really are meeting those needs. We'll have to carry our message outside the classroom, outside the college, outside professional meetings such as this one.

Community college teachers have never had much chance to live in that famous ivory tower that university professors are said to hide in. We have, however, shown a tendency to retreat to the security of our five-room apartments with the safety lock on the door. We've left the community relations staff to explain what we're are trying to do, and they

haven't done a very good job, maybe because they don't understand it themselves. If we want to survive as reputable teachers in a humane discipline, we'll have to become activists. We'll have to do more than just go to school, meet some classes, read some papers, and spend the evening reading great books--or whatever we do with our leisure time. We'll have to argue--hard--for changes that go beyond getting the cost-of-living added to our own paychecks.

It's easy enough to see some of the threats that endanger our efforts to teach English the way it should be taught. One of them is the tendency to regard English as a "tool subject." We must keep reminding the admistration, the rest of the college--and ourselves--that English is more than a tool; it's a humane discipline with goals and values of its own. Certainly we should help students gain skills that will enable them to understand their nursing texts, writing clearer history papers, be more efficient employees for American Tel & Tel, and earn more money when they graduate. But unless we use language to help students create a more reasonable society, rather than just getting ahead in the one we've got, we may be wasting our time.

Another threat is the increasing tendency to regard education as a business--the "ed biz." But education, and English in particular, is not an undertaking that can operate from the same premises and on the same priciple of profit as the local hardware store or the giant oil companies. Education is concerned with people, not profits and products. I asked an administrator last spring how you delivered an educational product--it was one of the college goals--and he said it meant how many students you "processed" during a semester--the word is his. He went on to tell me how many "outputs" each unit should be producing to meet the goals that had been set for the year. I had thought my goal was to help individual human beings use their language to lead better lives; I found it scary having that goal transformed into numbers of products processed.

Ernest House put this vision of education well when he said that

> ... educational services are perceived as products to be mass produced. This production-line model calls for elaborate prespecification and quality control. Emphasis is placed on that which is replicable, easily quantifiable, readily discernible, and unambiguous. Education becomes engineering and finally industrial production. Evaluation becomes greatly simplified; one need only compare the prespecification to the final product...

That may be a good way to put a Chevrolet together, but it's no way to teach English.

Arthur W. Chickering, in distiguishing between work that manufactures something and work that helps somebody, reminds us that

> Achieving high-quality service is more complicated than producing high-quality goods. Given human complexity and orneriness, it is difficult to develop solutions and formulas that work for large numbers. A television set is a complex instrument, but producing high-quality sets in

> large numbers is much easier than producing high-quality programing. Designing high-powered automobiles, fast trains, and supersonic airplanes requires high-level technological skills and scientific knowledge, but we are far from designing environments and related transportation systems that effectively serve human needs. . .And, given the escalating ratio of divorces to happy, solid marriages, it looks as though putting a chicken in every pot is easier than having a congenial family dinner.

I'm not suggesting that English departments, regardless of how humanely they operate, can raise the level of TV programs, clean up the environment, or reduce the divorce rate; I am suggesting that if we regard students as carburetors coming off a production line, we'll contribute to more television at a ten-year-old level, more willingness to let Concordes land wherever it's profitable, and more human beings unable to live peacefully together.

If we want to survive, we need to keep reminding people that language and reading and writing are not as simple as carburetors; they can't be prespecified. Language is part of our humanity, of ourselves. Reading and writing are highly individual and personal acts. Xerox machines can be prespecified, and they can duplicate. People, until we move into that Brave New World Huxley terrified us with a long time ago, cannot be prespecified, but the can make choices, and they can create--if we let them do it.

Another threat--another way of assuming that people can be prespecified--is the increasing use of nation-wide tests: instruments that assume everybody comes from the same background, has undergone the same kind of experiences, and should therefore be able to answer the same questions in the same way. Testing is very big business in this country, and getting bigger by the minute.

As I suppose everybody knows, competency testing is here--or almost here. More than half the states in the country have either passed laws mandating competency tests as a condition for high school graduation or have such bills under consideration. It's easy enough to say, "Oh, that's just the high schools; nothing to do with us." But if the legislatures, instead of the teachers, are determining what every high school student should know, it won't be long until they're passing laws saying what every junior college student, every university student, maybe every teacher, should know. Does your state have a competency test? Did you attend any of the hearings--or were there any? Did you write to any legislators? If you have such a test, do you know who made it and what it covers? If we want to survive, I think we must take some of those actions and be able to answer most of those questions.

The competency tests are increasing, probably, because the public, with the help of sensational press, has misinterpreted the results of some other tests--most notably, the National Assessment and the SAT. Headlines across the country screams that students are getting worse, but the articles fail to specify, most of them, what "worse" means. It's true that the holistic scoring of the National Assessment showed an apparent decline in the writing ability of 13- and 17-year-olds (not of 9-year-olds), and nobody is quite sure why. A closer look, however--a look the papers didn't take, but we ought to--show that the decline was in the conceptual skills,

not the technical, and the clamor for back-to-basics--back to more spelling, more mechanics, more drills--can't increase conception and creativity.

A fourteen-year decline in the SAT scores, especially the verbal part, has been used as another reason for proclaiming that the schools, and especially English teachers, are not doing their job. But there's even more public misconception about what the Scholastic Aptitude Test is, and what it's supposed to measure, than there is about the National Assessment. The SAT was never intended to measure educational effectiveness; it does not reflect the overall goals of education; and it bears little, if any, relationship to success in life. SAT was intended only to predict probable academic success in college, and the only people who should be concerned with the scores are the admissions officers of colleges which do not have open admissions, colleges which want to work only with students who are already pretty good education bets. Instead, the press got excited and everybody got concerned.

Concern was so great that the College Board appointed a panel of experts to figure out why the SAT scores have gone down. The panel's report, which came out in August of this year, has not received as much publicity as the decline did, but the publicity it has received has distorted what the panel said. Becoming familiar with that report, making the public understand it, should be part of our survival technique. We ought to examine the test itself, but since most of us can't do that, we should at least know the abilities it asks for. The verbal section has four kinds of items: antonyms, analogies, sentence completion, and reading comprehension. The content of the questions is not confined to English; content comes from social, political, scientific, artistic, and philosophical writing, as well as literature. The test, in other words, measures background and experience. It's not surprising that the panel found the initial decline, the one that began in the sixties, resulted mostly from keeping a promise--from making higher education available to more people from all kinds of backgrounds. More students took the test, students from groups previously discriminated against: minorities, women, the poor. These weren't students with lower abilities or even, necessarily, lower achievement, but they were students whose experiences were different from the experiences the test was designed to measure. A lot of the new people taking the test come to community colleges; they're our students. And the panel was careful to point out that even the predictive part of the test--the thing it was created to do--works best with traditional students following a traditional course of study in a traditional college.

The panel was also careful to say that reasons for the continued decline of the scores in the last six or seven years are only guesswork. It's these guesses, however, that have gotten the publicity and are doing the damage. Maybe, the panel said students have a tendency to choose courses they think will demand less effort, and maybe, therefore, electives have something to do with the decline; nevertheless, the panel found no significant relationship between electives and declining scores. That didn't keep newspapers from reporting "Electives force scores down" and editorial writers from proclaiming that electives and permissiveness must go. The panel tried, too, to discover whether experimental teaching methods, open classrooms, nongraded courses, had contributed to the decline; they found no evidence that any of those innovative methods were the culprits. It

had been suggested that experience training--letting students spend some of their time out of the classroom and on the job--might be to blame, but the panel found that those students tended to get higher scores than the students who stayed glued to their desks; vocational and technical training seemed to have nothing to do with it.

What the panel found does not support a back-to-basics movement, as most of the public and the press understand basics. The report, in fact, warns against a return to "uniform drills and exercises commended only by a traditional pedagogy" and argues or "a larger emphasis on the fundamentals of learning that can be identified as strengthening the base on which all students can build." The report stresses the need for careful writing and critical reading; it finds the reliance on tests which require little or no writing "unfortunate." It suggests that "The only right answer is to vary the instructional process still more to take account of increased individual differences, but without lowering standards--which we recognize is a form of magic, but one that has been performed in this country for a long time."

The panel found, in fact, that the causes for the decline are not simple, and neither are the solutions. As English teachers, we need to understand this complexity; we need to help the public understand it. As Arthur Applebee points out in an analysis that will be published by SLATE this month, "We are likely to suffer the consequences if we allow others to draw the inferences for us."

One possible explanation the panel didn't suggest, but that we might want to consider, is the effect of heavier workloads. If English teachers are going to work that magic the panel referred to, they must have time to deal with individual differences; they must have time to respond to what students have written. Administrators sometimes tell us there's no evidence that class size makes any difference; common sense tells us it does, and one study backs that common sense up. In research conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia in the public schools of that city, the bank found that smaller class sizes did indeed produce greater achievement. If that doesn't convince our administrators, maybe we'd better do some research of our own. And we can certainly see that the new NCTE College Workload Statement gets wide circulation; it may help.

I don't think we can get rid of the tests--the competency tests, the achievement tests the intelligence tests, the placement tests--but we can work hard interpreting what they measure and what they mean. We can explain the ways in which test results can be misused and abused, and the ways students can be harmed by those abuses. We can show that standardized tests are a move toward the mechanization--the dehumanization--of education, and we can demonstrate that, in English at least, tests measure only the most mechanical and the least important parts of how people use their language. There's no way that objective questions on standardized test, graded and reported by machines, can make fair judgments about how well students can talk or write. And even if we insist, as I think we must, that to test writing we need a writing sample, the situation doesn't get much better. I'd hate to have unalterable decisions made about my competence, about my future--in effect, about me--on the basis of what I produced in forty minutes

on a topic somebody else had chosen. Writing samples are another way of making writing a mechanical act--words ground out in response to an artificial situation--instead of what writing should be: an act of communication in which somebody who has something to say says it because it needs saying.

And when the machines grind out the mechanical scores, we'll have to interpret what the numbers mean. Very few tests are reported in absolutes; that is, they don't tell how many questions a student got right according to the answer key. They tell, instead, how the student did in relation to other students who took the same test. They're exercises in competition, not in learning. Rather than measuring what students know, they measure who scored better than whom. A percentile score is not a percentage; it's a comparison. Nevertheless, the St. Louis papers keep bewailing the fact that scores in some of the city's schools are below the city norm, and parents get upset about it. Half the city's students will always be below the city's norm; half of them will always be in the lowest percentile, becuase that's what norm and percentile mean.

But even if we successfully explain what a norm is, we still can't answer the question, "Below the norm on what?" We're not allowed to know what the testmakers believe we should be teaching. The questions on standarized test are always a carefully guarded secret, not just from the students but from their teachers, too. A bill recently introduced in Congress might remedy that: the bill calls for testing companies to make questions and answers public within thirty days after the tests are given, and would require that the students who took the test receive copies of the questions and the correct answers after the tests had been scored. That proposal seems to me so sensible I'm sure it will never get passed. But it should. The value of a test--any test--is in letting students know where they fell short so they can do something about it. Tests that don't provide that information are merely penalties, punishing people for unidentified shortcomings. If test questions, and the expected answers, were actually published, the public could decide whether the questions were fair, and some of the people doing the most complaining might discover that their own scores were not much "above the norm." One of our survival techniques might be to write our own Congressional representatives in support of Representative Harrington's bill.

We need to keep reminding ourselves--and other people--that tests aren't sacred. At best, they provide only a tentative report on a very narrow portion of a human being's abilities. But even a journal as reputable as the New Republic was horrified, a week or so ago, at the notion that somebody might "fiddle with the tests"--might, presumably, change the questions so that they better represented human capabilities and needs. The New Republic article was referring to the pre-medical scores used by the University of California at Davis in connection with the Bakke case, but the comment is unfortunately typical of the way too many people regard tests and test scores. A lot of the questions ought to be fiddled with; in English, at least, we should insist on some fiddling.

We ought to write to the New Republic protesting the assumption that test questions are sacred, just as we ought to write to our local papers when their news reports give simple-minded explanations for complex problems, or their editorial writers demand a return to drills and diagraming.

We ought to show up at PTA meetings, town councils, civic organizations--any place that will let us in--and convince discontented voters and worried parents that all of us want the same thing: students who are better readers, better writers, better language-users, better citizens. The disagreement is only whether English professionals--that's us--are better judges of how to do it than the state legislatures, the testing companies, or the national press.

We ought, in fact, to join SLATE and become thoroughly familiar with its publications. (This is my own bit of propaganda, justified, I think, because SLATE, as part of its own educational effort, is responsible for my attending this conference.) SLATE, in case you don't know, is an acronym for Support for the Learning and Teaching of English. SLATE is the social and political action wing of the National Council of Teachers of English, organized in the belief that the English profession can't survive by merely bemoaning the terrible things that have happened; we can only survive by influencing events before they happen.

If we want to survive as a humane discipline, we must make clear what we're trying to do, why we're doing it, and probably, the limitations of what we can do. Not too long ago a New York high school graduate filed a five-million-dollar educational malpractice suit on the grounds that his high school had released him in a condition of functional illiteracy. The student lost the suit, but the judge recommended that some higher court should decide whether school systems can be held accountable financially for how much students learn.

Commenting on that malpractice suit, a letter to the editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch last week suggested that, "Carried to its logical conclusion, this pass-the-buck excuse for reasoning could lead one to believe that a teacher could sit down with a block of wood and teach it to read and write." The letter went on to predict what might happen if the court should decide that schools can indeed be held accountable:

> Students will acquire a new pastime. During lunch and between classes, instead of sneaking quick smokes, they could peruse the actuarial figures for specific educational defects. Imagine their drooling when they read that $5,000,000 can be awarded to graduates that are completely illiterate. Perhaps they could get $1,000,000 for the inability to fill out an unemployment compensation form. Five hundred thousand dollars might not be unrealistic for the student who, upon graduation, is unable to utter a complete sentence without using the phrase "you know."
>
> Finally, to protect themselves from damaging malpractice suits, adminstrators of educational institutions may have to resort to some extreme measures. Consider the following press release:
>
> "E. Cubbington Snish, Director of the Office of the United States Educational Policies, released a statement today informing the country that several institutions of higher learning are about to recall upwards of 100,000 recent graduates for defects in their college education.

"According to Snish, a national survey has indicated that many of these graduates left their respective schools in poor educational condition, being unable to read and write properly. Fearing that such defects might result in misleading or incorrect statements that could easily create dangerous foulups in business, political and military communications, the OUSEP staffers, working with the several institutions of higher learning, have developed a plan to upgrade basic educational skills at no cost to the individuals involved.

"Shortly, thousands of letters will go out to these particular graduates, notifying them that Educational Reactivation Centers will be established in high schools and junior colleges across the nation. The program is expected to be in full operation within a month or two and, with a little cooperation on the part of the students themselves, the Government promises to return them to society in perfect working order in a relatively short time."

First the doctors, now the teachers! What next? Could we possibly sue God for not making us perfect?

The letter is very funny--the first time you read it. Maybe it's not so funny, if you think about it for a minute. It carries an uncomfortable echo of prespecifications and the manufacute of Chevrolets. The New York student is not the only one who has filed a malpractice suit, and the need for malpractice insurance aside--and that would break most of us--such legal actions raise some interesting questions.

One interesting thing in this fantasy world, of course, is that the universities are not correcting the defects themselves; they're sending defective students to junior colleges for reactivation--maybe that's a compliment. Even more interesting, however, is the question of what malpractice suits might do to admissions policies. If schools are required to bring every student up to a set level of achievement, can we risk letting just anybody in? Won't we have to use more tests, with more arbitrary scores, to guard ouselves against the possibility of somebody failing? The door, in community colleges, won't be open to the students who need education the most; there'll be tickets of admission, and signs saying, "Not for you; you're a poor risk." We're getting too much of that already. I don't want to go back to education for the elite. And maybe malpractice isn't a real threat--yet.

In spite of all that does threaten us, I don't think English teachers will disappear from the earth, like my dinosaur did. But I do think humane English teaching, as I define it, is endangered. I do think the promise we've been making--equal educational opportunity for everybody, regardless of race or sex or age or economic condition--is in danger. And I don't want us to evolve, as my friend's dinosaur did, into an entirely different species--a kind of machine that teaches toward a test somebody else made.

We've got bigger brains than the dinosaur had, and we've got a weapon the dinosaur didn't possess--language. We're supposed to be skilled

in using it. We can't collect from God because we're not perfect, but we can use our imperfect skills to fight for what we believe in. If we don't fight, maybe we don't deserve to survive.

Elizabeth McPherson
Buffalo, New York, October 1977

NOTES

p. 9 — Ernest R. House is from the Center for Instructional Research and Curriculum Evaluation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

p. 9 — Arthur W. Chickering's comments come from an article entitled "Vocations and the Liberal Arts," published in Relating Work and Education, ed. by Dyckman W. Vermilye, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1977, p. 131.

p. 12 — The panel's report, On Further Examination, is available from the College Board Publication Orders, Box 2815, Princeton, New Jersey, 08540, for $4. The final quotation is from p. 47 of the report.

p. 12 — Arthur Applebee, "The SAT Score Decline Report," in the fall 1977 SLATE Newsletter, available from NCTE to all SLATE contributors.

p. 13 — The bill introduced by Rep. Michael Harrington (D-Mass.) is reported in Councilgrams, September 1977, p. 6. The bill is H. R. 6776.

p. 13 — The New Republic comment appear in an unsigned article, "Disadvantaged Groups, Individual Rights," October 15, 1977, p. 7.

pp. 14-15 — The letter was signed by Edward J. Powers, Marquette, Michigan; it appeared on page 4E of the October 12, 1977 issue of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.